CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **J. ALLISON DEFOOR**

INTERVIEWER: **JAMES M. DENHAM**

PLACE: **STATE CAPITAL BUILDING**

DATE OF INTERVIEW: **APRIL 18, 2000**

A= ALLISON DEFOOR
M= JAMES M. DENHAM, 0,.(

Transcribed by: Debby Turner

M: I am sitting here with the former sheriff of Monroe County, Allison DeFoor, and today is April 18, 2000. Mr. DeFoor, can you tell us a little bit about your background, where you grew up, where you went to school?

A: Sure. I think my claims to fame for your purposes would be being one of the few sheriffs to run for statewide office and belonging to a very, very exclusive fraternity of ex-judge sheriffs. There are only, to my knowledge, six of us, at least alive, at this point - me; Bob Butterworth, the current Attorney General; George Bresher who took his place; Bob Floyd who used to be mayor of Miami in, I think in '33 and then went on to a pretty interesting and eclectic career; David Strahn who now runs a mediation school out of Orlando and Tom Romberger who now has a very large law firm out of Orlando and Tallahassee.

The interesting thing about each of us is the eclecticism that seems to run as a common thread through all of us. I guess anyone who would want to be a judge and a sheriff is probably a pretty eclectic person.

I ended up in law enforcement kind of backhandedly. Focirsitomelie ()-4(6()-4(he)3()-3(n(N)54(w)15(ho)3(-5i

and he was at least incompetent if not corrupt and ran against him and beat the incumbent sheriff, Bobby Brown, who went on to become supervisor of elections as things can only happen in the Keys.

He started making his deputies take polygraph tests and 60% of them quit on the spot - wouldn't take the test. His chief deputy took the test, failed it and he ultimately became my opponent after being Sheriff Freeman's opponent on two other occasions.

M: Okay, Sheriff Freeman was in office how long before?

A: He was in 12 years I believe.

M: Okay, so he was there from say '70-79?

A: No, no. He got in in about '76 because we got in in '80. No, he got in in '78; '76 or '78, I can't remember which.

We started doing a lot of the investigations that cleaned up Everglades City, cleaned up Key West, and then a vacancy opened up in the upper Keys for a judgeship my third year out of law school and I ran for that.

I will tell you a story that kind of captures how I won. I thought I would run in Southern style - run once to get known and once to win, and was out knocking on doors one day and had developed kind of a reputation for leading the raids. I knocked on the door of a bondsman who was affiliated with, as bondsman usually are, with the criminal community, and I had caused him a lot of pain because I had started actually calling in his bonds, which the previous state attorney did not do. They had a nice little racket going. So, when he opens up the door, he jumps back, looks to see if I am alone, and I look to see if he is alone, and he says in his thick Conch accent says, "Boy, what are you doing out on a hot summer's day like this?" It is July, hot as hell and I am knocking on doors. I said, "Benito, I am looking for votes. I guess there is no point in stopping here." He said, "Oh no, no, no brother. I am with you. My family and friends are with you." I said, "Why? I hurt you badly." He says, "Oh, we are gonna put your ass in traffic court where you can't hurt nobody." So, I won with about 69% of the vote against three opponents.

M: So, Freeman would have still been sheriff at that time.

A: Freeman was still sheriff.

M: How would you characterize his regime as sheriff?

A: Very, very, very progressive. He brought the department into the 20th century. He was scrupulously honest. He got the department accredited. He took up his budget when the commissioners would not cooperate on it, I think, on two occasions, and on one got money out of the state cabinet above and beyond what the county gave him. He cleaned up the department.

M: So, his decade as sheriff, a rough decade as sheriff, was pretty positive in your view?

A: Very, very positive. One of the best sheriffs this state has ever seen, and he was a very interesting and complex guy.

state attorney was an ally because I helped him get elected. By then the public defender was his former chief assistant and former law partner who I had helped get appointed when we indicted the public defender.

We had sort of a, for lack of a better word, a political machine. It was for a good purpose. We figured out a long time ago that the bad people conspired, so it was about time that the good people did. We were very, very afraid that the bad guys would try and take the sheriff's office, and that would have undone everything that we had done in the way of reforms.

M: Did they have a candidate?

A: They had Frank Hernandez, the Chief Deputy who had failed his polygraph test. He was once again the Democratic nominee. He beat the undersheriff in the Democratic primary. By then a lot of the progressives were in the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party, particularly in a low turnout second primary environment which is what happened in this case, the undersheriff who had the lead going into the primary, was defeated by the bad guy, because with the small turnout, they had enough bad guys to make a mark. So, our prudence paid off. I just buried Frank Hernandez. I got 62-63%.

M: Did Freeman come out on your side?

A: He did not.

M: Why?

A: His wife was running for Superintendent of Schools. So, he did not, but to his credit, the undersheriff, who I made quite clear to him that if he ran, that he could anticipate that post election I would not take any retributive action again, but the post or position of undersheriff would no longer exist.

M: If he ran?

A: And he did. So, I campaigned on the under sheriff's job being a redundancy, and this is where the tricky part politically came in. Sheriff Freeman and Under Sheriff Meg who went on to become undersheriff of Charlotte County under Worch, were classic command and control hierarchal organizational men. That is the way they were trained, that is the way they were raised, and that is the way people thought in their era. I was not.

I was a classicist I believed in decentralization to the maximum level possible. I believed in taking the risk that your frontline people really know what is going on better than you do as the general. It is classic - armies go through these conflicts in terms of management style. In peacetime they become more hierarchal and in wartime they become more decentralized by necessity, and it was my theory that at the time with crime rates then going up, we were in the functional equivalent of war and we should decentralize. It was also the beginning of community-based policing, problem-oriented policing.

So, I had to campaign on those themes to address where the people wanted to go, where the frontline troops wanted to go, where I thought we wanted to go but at the same time be true to Sheriff Freeman's legacy because he had left a great legacy. I finally was able to articulate it in a concept that every revolution needs to either be renewed or it will

expire, and Sheriff Freeman's revolution then being 12 years old needed to either be renewed or it would die.

M: Right.

A: And they had created such a hierarchal enterprise that all decision making flowed up to the undersheriff who then just went under from the weight of it. He couldn't process the paper; much less make the right decisions.

So, when I won, we began - I was only there two years (I'll talk about how I left in a minute), but we probably did more change in two years than certainly anybody had seen in 12 years in the department before. We changed everything. We changed the weapons. We went to automatic weapons from revolvers. We changed the radios, codes, and radio system. We privatized the jail, which turned out to not be a very successful experiment, but was innovative nonetheless. We went from three offices to eight. We went from nine functional layers in the department down to four. We totally decimated the upper middle management layers because they weren't productive and for every major I got rid of I could hire two deputies.

The institution was in need of reform. When I first started going around, they introduced me to my chief fiscal officer and my comptroller. I asked why I needed two and they said they kept an eye on each other. I said they look a lot alike and was told they were sisters and they lived together. So, there was a lot of..

M: What was your budget when you took over?

A: 23 million, I think, something like that. When I left it was up around 27 or 28.

M: Can you go through the subjects of the budget or divisions of the budget? For example, how much would it be for the deputies?

A: For personnel, I can't remember that. The jail was a big problem. We were then under court order from Judge Hoover. In fact, he came down one day to inspect the jail as he wanted to do. If Judge Hoover has a pound to screw in, he turns it one turn at a time and he came down and said, "You guys better make this place look good." They said, "We will boss." He shows up and leans against the wall, comes away and there is a stripe of paint up his suit arm.

There was also a bit of a cultural conflict. I brought in a bunch of Republican, very progressive police folks who had come from the upper Keys station which had been functioning on its own and into a culture that had been dominated by Democrats and Conchs in Key West.

Sergeant Gonzalez, for instance, I had seen him on Election Day and he was carrying a Hernandez sign. He said, I will never forget it, he said, "Stick it up your ass." He said this the day before. As soon as I got elected sheriff I, of course, called for Sergeant Gonzalez. He came in like he was about to be executed. I said, "Listen. You can cuss me all you want to after 5 o'clock and before 9 o'clock, but from 9 to 5, your ass is mine." I told him as long as he did his job, we would get along fine. He walked out and one of the majors said he thought I was going to get rid of him and I said no, not now. I could get rid of anybody and it can't be claimed to be political, because he is my poster boy and I didn't

get rid of him.

I was not going to do political firing. I had some top-level people who had been there just too long. I sent one of them off to Harvard for a fellowship to get him accredited to have him go out and be a police chief, and I started spotting talented young people and bringing them in. Steve Casey is now the #3 at the Department of Juvenile Justice. I plucked him out of beverage, sent him off to college, then graduate school and to the national academy.

I set up a program where the department would pay for people to go to college, and that was pretty innovative in its time. The bottom line of all of this is that we ended up with a crime rate that was 43% lower in the city of Key West than Dade County. We shared the same criminal base. So, what we did was very, very effective.

M: Geographically, the traveling back and forth between the upper Keys and lower Keys was really difficult.

A: Very difficult. It was broken into three zones. They each had one office when I started and several when I finished, but this was before cell phones and it was a big waste of time going back and forth, but you had to do it.

M: The radios probably didn't carry, did they?

A: We had three dispatchers, so you would have to be handed off. It, again, was difficult. They have now put in 800-megahertz systems and they allegedly can do the whole county.

We had two shot deputies during my tenure and one reserve deputy killed in an automobile accident, plus we buried Sheriff Freeman. So, I spent a lot of time at funerals. Actually, the first shot deputy was two hours after midnight when I took over. They said that Sheriff Freeman and I were both called because they said they didn't know who to call because I wasn't to be sworn in until the next morning, and they actually didn't know where I was. I figured like they did that I didn't need to worry about telling them where I was until the next morning or ʻ m ree mϰ Ä t xt # eɔ ʌ ʼΩ l" t

A: I can get there from here. There were two lawyer sheriffs at the time - me and Sheriff

duck sheriff.

M: Now MacDougal is?

A: Lee County.

M: Lee County? And he was the sheriff the same time you were sheriff.

A: Yes, at the same time.

M: And he is no longer there.

A: No, no. He is still there. He leans over and they are making a bunch of chittlins. I have eaten chittlins fine under duress. They were somehow broiling them and then putting hot sauce on them. I was looking down at this stuff. MacDougal is eating a mouthful and says, "What is this stuff?" I said, "MacDougal, that is pretty damn close to eating boiled condoms." He spit that stuff out. So, in that particular year, in '88, you had for the first time a very large turnover of sheriffs, probably over a third of the sheriffs in the state turned over. You had a larger number of new breed sheriffs. You had for the first time a cohesive minority, very progressive Republican sheriffs.

M: Can you briefly describe your relationships with other counties? I know bordering Monroe is obviously Dade and Lee County or actually Collier? Can you tell me if you had any exchanges or relationships with them or incidents when you needed to cooperate?

A: Even when I was prosecutor, Chokoluskee was a hot bed and I ended up going into Everglades City and checking into the Rod and Gun Club to check into what was going on. As I was checking in, a guy whispered under his breath that they knew I was there. So, we had done a lot of joint investigations and obviously with Dade, our relations were good as we shared a lot of the same smugglers. Dade was such a big shop and we were just a little tail of a dog.

We had very good relations with the federal authorities because of the drug smuggling and we had a unique position because our airplanes, if we were taking a prisoner somewhere, we flew over virtually all of Florida, so we actually set up a little mini-airline. We would e-mail or fax the counties and say look we are flying a prisoner to Charlotte, anyone want to ride in between. We would actually bill them and we made money on a lit

M: That's all?

A: Yeah, because mostly we left that to the marine patrol. We had such a huge marine patrol and the feds had all kinds of boats in their task force.

M: So, it would just be a matter of you calling them and getting them to help?

A:

dispatch center. We got the 911 calls and we transferred their 911 calls to them - it was crazy. So, I came back with a report that was about four inches thick that said I could give you what you got for a

A: I am very proud of the fact that we really reached out to diversify the base of the sheriff's office. I appointed the first female officer. I appointed the first female district commander, Captain Val Thompson. I appointed the first African-American officer and district commander.

M: By officer you mean sergeant up to..

A: Lieutenant or above.

M: Okay, like the military.

A: I had the first gay division chief. He wasn't sworn, but he was head of a division. We greatly changed the face of the department in that regard. In fact, the first order that I signed came about because at Sheriff Freeman's retirement party, the human resources director who was a very attractive young lady who wore a very attractive gown that went down to - very low on her back, and I watched one of our senior officers run his hand right down her backbone. I called her over and asked if there were sexual harassment problems in the department. She said, no sir, we have a very large sexual harassment problem in the department. I said I want you to make sure that the first order that I sign is the toughest sexual harassment order in the world. She brought me that order on the first day that I was sheriff and I said this isn't strong enough. She said there was nothing stronger in the world. I said yeah there is - you put in there that if the sheriff that does it that they go directly to FBLE. I want these people to know that I mean business. I ended up losing a senior officer who did not believe that I was serious.

M: So there was a code that you implemented, not specifically for that case, but just as a general code that would be on record, that people would know about.

A: Yes. We really brought this department into the 21st century.

M: Now, my research has shown me that it was in the early '70s when women started wearing a gun and going on the road. There are a lot of disputes about where was the first woman deputy with a gun on the road. Some counties claim that they had the first black sheriff - you know what I am talking about. It is kind of the same for the women's side. How many women were on the staff when you took over - do you remember, just roughly?

A: It was a minority.

M: Were there any with guns?

A: Oh yeah. Sheriff Freeman in the late '70s, early '80s cracked that barrier. He was very progressive.

M: What about African-Americans? Did Sheriff Freeman hire them too?

A: Sheriff Freeman hired African-Americans but none of them had progressed to the level of officers. I made sure that..

M: So, by the time that you came on, there were some senior people who had been on

the force for quite a while.

A: There were both women sergeants and African-American sergeants that I made sure became officers.

M: Now, when you wiped out most of your senior command staff..

A: Yep, there is a lot of antigravity that goes with that.

M: Kind of like the French revolution and Napoleon. Opportunities for advancement were great. Okay, after you left, let's just go ahead and summarize a bit. After you left the sheriff's office obviously you did not become Lt. Governor. So, you went back to practice law and have been doing that pretty much up until now.

A: I went to Wackenhut and became president of one of their subsidiaries, set it up and got it started. I then went from there to be general counsel for a pharmaceutical company that was based in the Keys and in Philadelphia. I divided my time but stayed in the Keys. I went into practice about 1993 and built the firm up until I joined the Governor's office in 1999. I also started seminary and am in the third year of that experience.

M: Where are you doing that?

A: South Florii6 C6.0h03>40036>BDC BTETBT1 0 0 165Tm 0 Tc[(S)4(ps-40036>8 1 118.46BDC BTTc[(c.31